

**Algorithm = Minefield**  
**Critical Thinking = Tool**  
**Empathy = Linchpin**

The recent viral performance by Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine (Luciano, 2026), where he engaged a crowd in singing along with “Killing in the Name of” (Commerford, et al., 1992) and spoke to its anti-fascist lyrics, is another powerful example of popular culture and politics overlapping. Arguably, the current political climate of the U.S. is at its greatest divide to date... with all the world watching with bated breath. This divide was recently exacerbated by the tragic death of an ICE protester in Minneapolis. The tragedy alone is not so much the cause for unrest but the “choosing of sides” so-to-speak of partisan politics’ expression in the media. MSNBC frames the event as a violation of constitutional rights (MS NOW, 2026). Fox News characterizes the suspect as a domestic terrorist focused on “maximum damage” (Fox News, 2026, January 24). CNN loops the video evidence which might have some saying it is for sensationalism, while others would say it is for justice (CNN, 2026, January 25). Fox is saying the left is pushing propaganda, while at the same time vilifying those telling you to take out your camera and film proof (Fox News Clips, 2026, January 27). The Department of Homeland Security wants to ignore evidence and listen to the narrative (The Daily Show, 2026) and at the same time, this same source suggested that they are not a reliable source for information (CNN, 2004 & Junior Correspondent, 2026). All while this is going on, citizens posit over conspiracy theories such as the reason for the Federal Government’s intrusion into state policing was to cause chaos in the first place in order to subvert democracy (other98, 2026). What’s crazier is that they might be right!

Our students are walking through this minefield of emotional and informational propaganda every day when they pick up their phone, go online, talk to a friend who’s doing the same, turn on the TV, etc. As Mirra, Kelly, and Garcia (2021) argue, the traditional approach to media literacy of teaching students to fact-check or identify “fake news” is necessary but not enough. When students are living in a hotbed of political turmoil, simply agreeing on facts does not necessarily lead to justice or any form of resolution.

Everyone, including educators, holds biases, and finding a truly unbiased news source is increasingly difficult. To combat this, we must embrace a variety of **voices** in the media. As my colleague demonstrated through his social studies class, the goal is not merely to debate but to inhabit opposing viewpoints. By forcing students to engage in a class debate and cruelly positioning them to argue for the opposition, he encouraged them to dig deeper. Likewise, in the “Digital Democratic Dialogue” (3D) Project (Mirra, et al., 2021), students found that sharing personal stories rather than just debating headlines allowed them to understand the “wide range of American experiences” and develop nuance. Furthermore, empowering students to conduct their own inquiry such as in “See it for Yourself”, young minds are encouraged to leave out the carefully curated narrative and form their own judgement by embracing the evidence (Burwell, 2023).

Ultimately, while critical thinking is the tool we use to dissect information, empathy is the linchpin. Without the ability to imagine another’s reasoning there is **ONLY** conflict, no attempt at conflict resolution. We as teachers need to get our students focused on understanding with their frontal brains instead of the outrage with their Amygdalas.

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